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THE JOHN MUIR NEWSLETTER

UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC, STOCKTON, CA

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 4

FALL 2002

JOHN MUIR AND THE CIVIL WAR

by Millie Stanley

I suppose you have heard that they have drafted up in Marquette County and will be anxious to hear who are drafted. . . . you may be glad you were not taken."¹

Annie Muir penned these words in November, 1862, to her brother John who was a student at Wisconsin State University in Madison.

Two years before, when he was twenty-two years old, John had traveled from his farm home in Marquette County to the capitol city. He carried a bundle of mechanical inventions he had carved from shagbark hickory to display at the Tenth Annual Agricultural State Fair, an exciting event held on the ten-acre grounds below the university. His unique wooden clocks were housed in The Temple of Art and created quite a stir among the fair goers. This was Muir's introduction to the world beyond the farm.

When the fair was over John spent a few months in Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi River and then returned to Madison where he enrolled in the second twenty-week State University term beginning February 6, 1861. As he wrote in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*: "I was desperately hungry and thirsty for knowledge and willing to endure anything to get it." He wrote of the kind professor "who

welcomed me to the glorious University — next to the kingdom of heaven."²

John settled into the northeast corner room on the first floor of the North Dormitory perched on the brink of the hill overlooking Fourth Lake. From his window he could take in the inspirational beauty of the lake and surrounding landscape. He spent portions of the next three years in the stimulating college atmosphere.

A few weeks after his enrollment a shadow darkened the land when Fort Sumter was fired upon on April 12, 1861. The Civil War had begun and Wisconsin immediately switched to a war footing. Governor Randall addressed the state legislature about determining how to set up training camps to arm and equip men and shape them into regiments. He said, "They should be made skillful in the use of arms. . . The men sent to war should be soldiers when they go."³ Camp Randall was soon established on the fairground lands below College Hill and became the major training ground for most of Wisconsin's 70,000 soldiers.

After a summer of farm work, John returned to campus in the fall, bringing his brother David with him. He was keenly aware of the drastic change in
(continued on page 5)

NEWS & NOTES

JOHN MUIR BIRTHPLACE UPDATE

The John Muir Birthplace Trust has completed the first phase of its project to create the John Muir Interpretive Centre at the site of John Muir's boyhood home in Dunbar, Scotland. Dogged by controversy initially over the possibility of gutting the building, the Trust has disavowed that idea. It is now fundraising for Phase Two, with a deadline of April 2003 for the completion of the exhibition design at the site. A rear extension of the ground floor of the building is anticipated. It is hoped that the official opening will occur in May, 2003.

One floor of the site will focus on John Muir and Dunbar, and another on Muir's life and legacy after he left Scotland. Temporary exhibits will highlight various relevant topics. For information, contact the Trust at: www.jmbt.org.uk

THE SIERRA INSTITUTE WILDERNESS FIELD STUDIES HAS ANNOUNCED ITS SPRING 2003 SCHEDULE

"California Wilderness: Philosophy, Religion and Ecopsychology"

will involve backpacking in Death Valley, Big Sur, the Yolla Bolly Mountains, etc., between April 1 - May 27.

"Nature and Culture: Cultural Ecology and Environmental Issues"

will be offered those same dates and at some of the same locations, as well as in Southern Oregon.

"Reclaiming your Place: The Art and Practice of Sustainable Living"

Discover the connections between wild nature and human culture through the study of bioregions, community, and sustainable lifeways. Live at two remote learning centers in northern California while exploring theories of local politics, environmental restoration, community building, and much more. Backpack in wildlands adjacent to residential areas. This provides first-hand study of sustainable alternatives to global mainstream culture.

For information on costs and other details of these U.C. Santa Cruz extension courses, check into:
www.ucsc-extension.edu/sierra

WILDERNESS REPORT MIXED ON NORTH AMERICA'S ENVIRONMENT

A new study the United States, Canada and Mexico released this year reports that the amount of land protected in North America tripled over the last 30 years, yet pollution, loss of habitat and hunting still threaten at least 235 plants and animals.

Since 1970, the acreage off-limits to development rose from

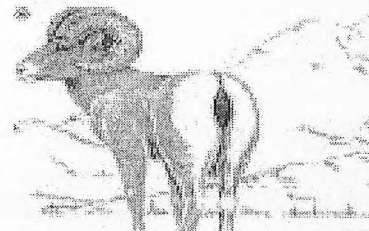
247 million to 741 million acres — about 15 percent of the continent's land surface.

Creation of new wilderness areas accounts for the increase. In 1980 wilderness areas doubled with the enactment of the Alaska National Interest Lands Act. Nineteen new "biosphere reserves" were created in Mexico in the 1990s, and Canada has tripled the area of protected sites over the past three decades, the study said.

But increased trade across borders raises the need for more collaboration to protect against threats such as the spread of non-native species, reports the study, released by the Montreal-based Commission for Environmental Cooperation.

The study was required under the North American Free Trade Agreement's environmental accord, and provides the first government-backed snapshot of the overall status of the continent's ecology. It was submitted to the three nations' top environmental officials.

The hope is that the study and future ones like it will help the NAFTA countries better track the impact of trade and other economic activity on shared issues such as migratory species and water resources.



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John Muir's Aunt Mary

by Roberta M. McDow

(Continued from the Summer 2002 issue)

There are records of contact among members of the two families. The 1860 census for the town of Dekorra in Columbia County, Wisconsin, shows Mary Blakely and her son John Blakely living in the household headed by John Watson.¹ John Blakely's son, John, Jr., was not shown and is presumed to have been in Poynette attending school.² Also listed were John Watson's wife, Lizzie, and their children: Ann, age seventeen; Mary, age three; and James, age one.³ These were "the Watsons," the people John Muir and his brother David visited on their way to and from the university in Madison.

The ages given in the 1860 census for John, "Lizzie," Ann and her brother James are not consistent with those in the 1851 Scottish census. Since the ages of the parents given in 1860 are fairly accurate when compared with their birth year or age at death, the age of seventeen for Ann is probably correct.

More puzzling is the difference in age given for James. He was four in 1851. In 1860, James was one. The only logical explanation is that the first James died sometime after the census in 1851 and the second son to be named James was born in 1859. Agnes, the second daughter listed in the 1851 census, is not shown in the 1860 enumeration or in any record found of the Watson family. She is presumed to have died.

The first recorded visit of John Muir and his brother David to the Watsons occurred in the fall of 1861 when the young men were on their way to Madison. In John's letter to David and Sarah Galloway, he wrote: "We walked from Portage to Watsons.... Watsons were well, we arrived about dark. They were surprised and happy to see us and gave us sound welcome."⁴ John and David may also have seen the youngest member of the household at the time, Margaret, born in 1861.⁵

About two years later, June 1, 1863, John wrote Sarah and David Galloway that he would be at the Watsons on the eighteenth of the month.⁶ A week later, John wrote David not to go to Watsons because he would "start out upon a long botanical and geological tour...."⁷ Had they met at Watsons, they also would have met Elizabeth and John's newest child, a boy named Hamilton, born in May 1863.⁸ He was probably the last child for whom Mary would help care.

John did not return to school in Madison. In November, 1863, his friend J. L. High wrote to him with news about school and former fellow students who owed John money. Among them was a student named Blackly or possibly Blachly. Of him, High wrote: "Blackly [or Blachly] left about three weeks since being out of funds, so I have had no opportunity of collecting anything from him. He will probably be back next term."⁹

Although the name of the student is difficult to read, it is more likely to be Blackly, not Blachly, the former one of the spellings members of Mary's family used. There is no proof, however, that Blackly was Mary's grandson, John. He would have been fifteen in 1863. High's reference to him notwithstanding, no record of attendance at the university has been found for a John Blackly or Blachly.¹⁰

The last correspondence that has been found recording contact between John Muir and members of his Aunt Mary's family is a December, 1863, letter written by Anna Watson in Poynette to John. Although the name of Elizabeth and John Watson's oldest daughter has previously been given as Ann and she greets John as "Dear friend," the details in the letter indicate that they were most probably related. At the time the letter was written, Ann or Anna would have been about twenty. She was

John's first cousin, once removed. She wrote: "Mother's [Elizabeth's] health has been poor. David and his wife were here three weeks ago. She was well then.... I suppose your folks are all safe. I will inclose that long promised picture, although it is such a horrible looking thing I hate to send it.... I should like to have you write and let us know how all the folks are, and when you intend to make us another visit. I will be at home most of the winter, and I would like to have you come and bring Mary and Anna with you.... Your sincere well-wisher, Anna Watson."¹¹ In her letter, Anna also related that she had not been well. No further information has been found about her since that letter was written.

But who was Grace Blakeley Brown, that "aged daughter of Mary Muir" whom Frederic William Badè mentioned? The 1860 census data for Portage, Wisconsin, answers that question.

Two years prior to the census, a Mrs. Grace Blacklay married a William Brown in Portage.¹² Without additional information, Grace could not be identified as a daughter of Mary and Hamilton Blackley. The 1860 enumeration for Portage lists William Brown, twenty-six, shoemaker, born in England. In the household he headed were his wife Grace, age thirty, born in Scotland; Hamilton, age six, born in Scotland; Willie, age three, born in Wisconsin, and Paul, age four months, born in Wisconsin.¹³ With a six-year-old son born in Scotland named Hamilton, there could be no doubt that Grace was Mary and Hamilton's daughter. Three times, Mary and Hamilton had named a daughter Grizel in honor of Hamilton's mother. What Mary thought when Grizel changed her name to Grace can only be imagined.

Most likely, Grace and William were both single parents who married and produced at least one child. No further information about Grace or her family has been found until she appears in Badè's biography. Then, like the written record of her recollections given to Badè, she vanished again.

In January 1866, John Muir's brother Daniel went to Poynette to visit the Watsons.¹⁴ His visit may have been the last time any member of the Daniel Muir family saw Mary alive. She died on 22 May 1866 at the age of seventy-two and was buried in Arlington Cemetery near the community of Arlington, Wisconsin.¹⁵ If there was an obituary for her in a local paper, it has not been found. Her memorial is her descendants. Designating Mary as generation one, the eighth generation of her American descendants is now being born.

The next year, the Watsons' last child, John, was born and lived only two months and thirteen days. Elizabeth's husband died next in July 1868 at the age of fifty-eight years, nine months.¹⁶ The preceding month, John Blakely and his son John, Jr. bought land together in Columbia County.¹⁷ For a while, John, Sr. continued to live in the Watson household, now headed by Elizabeth.¹⁸ He died in March 1877 at the age of fifty-two.¹⁹

In 1875, John, Jr. had married Jane Allison, born in Scotland and brought to America at about the age of one year by her mother.²⁰ The sole heirs of John, Sr., they sold their land in 1880 to Elizabeth Watson, now the widow of Thomas Robertson.²¹ John and Jane were preparing to leave for Dakota Territory. Their destination was Brookings County where John had visited in 1878 with a party of men from the Poynette area including Elizabeth's son James Watson.²²

John and Jane went west in a covered wagon²³ with their two small children, Herbert, whose eponym is unknown, and Mary, her great-grandmother's namesake, the only mother her father had really known. Mary became a schoolteacher,²⁴ and would write in her father's obituary that his grandmother had come to America from Scotland. Except for her cemetery marker and the 1860 census, it is the only written record yet found of Mary (Muir) Blackley living in the United States.

In Dakota Territory, John and Jane would have more children. Their second son they named John Robert and the third

they named Ira Hamilton. After a few years, John and Jane changed the spelling of their surname to Blakely. Years later, after he moved further west, their son John Robert changed the spelling of his surname to Blakely.

In 1885, Daniel Muir Blackley, Mary and Hamilton's son, left Scotland with his wife and family to settle in the Poynette area of Wisconsin. Three of their children had died in Scotland, the oldest, Hamilton, among them. Their remaining six children, most of them adults, came with them. They were sons James, William, John, Thomas, Daniel, and their only daughter, Mary.²⁵ Mary would have no children of her own but would raise several nieces and nephews whose parents were ill or deceased.²⁶ "Her home was always open to all," her obituary stated, "and all who entered there found friendliness, peace and inspiration."²⁷

Although Daniel Muir Blackley came to America in 1885, it is doubtful that after his arrival he visited the uncle for whom he was named. His first concern was to settle his family in their new home. Missouri was some distance away. On 6 October 1885, his uncle Daniel Muir died in Kansas City.

Elizabeth, Daniel Muir's niece, who was born the year he left his childhood home, passed away in April, 1901. She was buried in the Watson plot in Arlington Cemetery where her daughter Mary had been interred in 1888.²⁸ Of Elizabeth, her eulogist wrote, "Soon after she came to Wisconsin she united with the Presbyterian church.... She loved the house of God and was often in her pew when persons of less energy would have thought themselves unable to be out of the house."²⁹

Elizabeth's daughter-in-law, the wife of her son Hamilton, wrote to John Muir's sister in Portage: "Dear Annie-- Mother died yesterday afternoon at two o'clock. The funeral will be tomorrow.... I hope you are well and that there is nothing to prevent your attending the funeral. Your loving cousin, Maude L. Watson."³⁰

This letter is the most recent written communication found between members of Mary's family and members of Daniel's. In time, the descendants of Elizabeth and those of John would not know they were collaterally related to the naturalist John Muir. Daniel Muir Blackley's descendants would remember the relationship, but they would not know that their ancestor Mary had come to America and was buried in Arlington Cemetery. The connection was made in February 1998 at the University of the Pacific when the writer and Daryl Morrison, Head of the Holt-Atherton Special Collections, compared what was known about Mary (Muir) Blackley with the genealogy of John Muir.

The person who comes to life from this comparison and the Scottish documents is a woman who nurtured children for sixty years. From the time she and her brother were orphaned until she died, she was actively engaged in the care of children. Birth and death were the rhythm of her life; love for others was its song.

In her biography of John Muir, Linnie Marsh Wolfe romanticized the assumed connection between John and the legendary Highlanders. She found in those brave hearts examples of courage. She need not have gone back that far. Courage was exemplified from childhood through advanced age by a more recent Muir. Her name was Mary.

ENDNOTES

1. John Watson household, 1860 U. S. census, Columbia County, Wisconsin, Town of Dekorra, page 23, dwelling 1335, family 1098.
2. John Blakely obituary.
3. John Watson household, 1860 U. S. census, Columbia County, Wisconsin.
4. Letter from John Muir to David and Sarah Galloway, Fall 1861, in John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Copyright 1984 Muir-Hanna Trust henceforth to be cited as JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 A/01/ 00146.

5. Elizabeth Watson household, 1870 U. S. census, Columbia County, Wisconsin, Town of Dekorra, page 20, dwelling 157, family 157.
6. Letter from John Muir to Sarah and David Galloway, 1 June 1863, in JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 A/01/00290.
7. Letter from John Muir to David Galloway, 8 June 1863, in JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 A/01/ 00290.
8. Hamilton Watson obituary, *Poynette Press*, 15 August 1930. On 25 April 1852, an older son named Hamilton was born to Elizabeth Blackley and John Watson, and was baptized 20 June 1852 at Crawford, Lanark County, Scotland ("Church of Scotland, Parish Church of Crawford, Old Parochial Registers 1698-1854," microfilm 1066586, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.) No other record of this son has been found. This first Hamilton is a third known child born to the Watsons in Scotland but not listed in the 1860 census.
9. Letter from J[ames] L. High to John Muir, 14 November 1863, in JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 A/01/ 00315. J. L.'s signature is sometimes misread as Heigh. Badè identifies him as James L. High who later became a "distinguished lawyer in Chicago," *Life and Letters*, 114.
10. Letter from Dorothy Weidner to Roberta M. McDow, 14 October 1998, held by McDow. Ms. Weidner is the Supervisor of the Transcript/Alumni Record Section, University of Wisconsin.
11. Letter from Anna Watson to John Muir, 6 December 1863, in JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 A/01/ 00320 and 00321.
12. Brown-Blackley marriage, 9 November 1858, Samuel B. Linscott, Justice of the Peace, Portage, Wisconsin.
13. William Brown household, 1860 U. S. census, Columbia County, Wisconsin, City of Portage, page 96, dwelling 847, family 687.
14. Millie Stanley, *The Heart of John Muir's World* (Madison: Prairie Oak Press, 1995), 124, citing a letter from Anne Muir to Daniel Muir, 1 January 1866, held at The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
15. Mary M. Blackley cemetery marker, Caldwell/United Presbyterian Cemetery, Arlington, Columbia County, Wisconsin, henceforth to be cited as Arlington Cemetery; photographed by Roberta M. McDow, 25 July 1997. The writer is indebted to Monna Aldrich of the Wisconsin State Old Cemetery Society for locating the Watson plot where Mary (Muir) Blackley is buried as well as for providing copies of obituaries and other invaluable data.
16. John Watson and his son John Watson cemetery markers, Arlington Cemetery; photographed by Roberta M. McDow, 25 July 1997.
17. Columbia County, Wisconsin, Book of Deeds, 26 June 1868, pp. 87-88, Columbia County Register of Deeds, Portage, Wisconsin.
18. Elizabeth Watson household, 1870 U. S. census, Columbia County, Wisconsin, Town of Dekorra.
19. John Blackley cemetery marker, Arlington Cemetery; photographed by Roberta M. McDow, 25 July 1997.
20. Mrs. John Blakely obituary, *The Brookings Register* (Brookings, South Dakota), 28 August 1930.
21. Columbia County, Wisconsin, Book of Deeds, Vol. 71:55, Columbia County Register of Deeds, Portage, Wisconsin.
22. "50th Wedding Anniversary," Mr. and Mrs. John Blakely, *Poynette Press*, 13 November 1925.
23. Herbert W. Blakely obituary, *The Brookings Register*, 29 September 1957.
24. Mrs. Edward F. Ecker [Mary Blakely] obituary, *The Brookings Register*, 7 September 1936.
25. Mrs. Joe Roessler [Mary Blackley], obituary, *Poynette Press*, 9 September 1949.
26. Thomas Blackley obituary, *Poynette Press*, n.d. September 1915.
27. Mrs. Joe Roessler obituary.
28. Elizabeth Watson and Mary E. Watson cemetery markers, Arlington Cemetery; photographed by Roberta M. McDow, 25 July 1997.
29. Mrs. E. Robertson obituary.
30. Letter from Maude L. Watson to Annie Muir, 22 April 1901, in JMP, Microfilm Edition, 1 B/11/ 06636.

the Madison atmosphere from the gala days of the fair. Military companies now drilled in the Temple of Art where he had displayed his hickory inventions the year before.

Despite the charged atmosphere, John enthusiastically pursued his studies. Two highly esteemed professors had a profound influence on him and his life direction. James Davie Butler, the gentle professor of the classics, stirred his love for great literature while Ezra Slocum Carr, professor of chemistry and natural history, showed him "nature's basement rooms."⁴ The two men became John's friends and he kept in close touch with them and their families in the years to come. But, all the while he was in school, wartime events affected him and became a part of his daily life.

At the outbreak of hostilities, many university students signed up for military duty and there was often difficulty maintaining enough students to continue classes. In speaking of his small Greek classes, Professor Butler said that "students whose last names were far apart in the alphabet sat close together on the bench."⁵

John often walked down College Hill to Camp Randall to visit his friends there and would minister to them as well. In a way he was following in the footsteps of his father, a self-made minister who preached around the Marquette County countryside. John attempted to provide moral guidance when he lectured his friends "upon the necessity of having the character formed and being possessed of tightly clenched principles before being put to such a trial as a three year soaking in so horrible a mixture."⁶

"The showy coverings of war hide its real hideousness," he wrote in the fall of 1861 to Frances Pelton of Prairie du Chien. He described for her the scene at Camp Randall when her cousins left for the front with the Seventh Regiment:

"I was down the morning they left Madison and helped Byron to buckle on his knapsack. Dwight with his fife seemed uncommonly happy but O how terrible a work is assigned them. . . how strange that such [men] can so completely compose themselves for such work and even march to the bloody fray in a half dance with a smile on their faces and perhaps a loud laugh."⁷

Meanwhile, John satisfied his deep hunger for learning as he vigorously pursued his studies. He also took part in campus activities and made friends.

He set up chemical experiments in his room and crafted mechanical inventions such as his later famous study desk. Introduced to the structure of a locust flower, he became excited about the study of botany, collecting plants from nearby woods, hills and lakes, and taking them back to his room to study. His years at Wisconsin State University helped to prepare him for his life work.

As time went on the war became a grim reality when more and more casualties occurred upon the battlefield. John's friend Bradley Brown from Marquette County was one of the wounded. He had participated in youthful escapades with John. His brother William came to Madison to search for him at Camp Randall, but unable to locate him, he visited with John at the North Dormitory instead. Eventually, Bradley was found ill at Camp Dennison.

There were fewer volunteers and recruits to fill the growing need for more men so finally the United States government resorted to a draft. On July 1, 1862, President Lincoln issued a call for 300,000 more men. Another draft followed in August.

In November, Wisconsin Governor Salomon ordered the draft commissioners to begin enrollment of all men between the ages of 18 and 45. On January 31, 1863, he ordered all drafted men to report to Camp Randall. For some months there was a great deal of activity and confusion in expediting the draft and forming regiments.

The gloom of war was a constant burden for the Muirs and their neighbors. Young James Whitehead told of his discharge from the Army in February of 1863 and being sent home to die but rallied because of the care and hope he received from John's father. Daniel Muir spent a great deal of time at Whitehead's bedside and brought him books.

John's mother Anne constantly worried that her sons would be drafted. On March 1, 1863, she brought John up to date on the situation of his brother Dan.

"Daniel left home yesterday for Canada. His father said he would not hinder him if he wished to go but would not advise him. He wouldn't give him money, but said I might if I wished. It is a hard trial to me — all my boys have left me. I try to think it is for the best. You will have heard of this new conscription law exempting none."⁸

It is clear from this letter that in the midst of the frantic rush to shore up the Union forces John's brother Dan went to Canada to avoid being drafted.

On May 16, 1863, Anne Muir wrote a sad letter to John from her home in Portage near the Wisconsin River where the Muir family now lived:

"As yet there seems to be no end to this unhappy war. It is rumored there will be drafting in this state in the month of June. I hope it will not take place. The dreadful miseries occasioned by this awful war can never be known. I hope it will speedily come to an end."⁹

Anne seemed to find comfort in her walks along the river where she could forget for a time her worry over the war.

John continued his university career till the end of the spring, 1863, term. He did not return in the fall. He stayed at Fountain Lake Farm with his sister Sarah and her husband David Galloway who now owned the original Muir farm.

Earlier he had thoughts of enrolling in the University of Michigan. In a letter written in the fall of 1863 he explained to his brother Dan in Canada why he did not do this. "A draft was being made just when I should have been starting for Ann Arbor, which kept me at home."¹⁰

Late in 1863 Camp Randall was flooded with conscripts and not long afterward the draft was canceled.

John stayed with the Galloways through the winter months until March 1, 1864, when he boarded a train in Pardeeville and headed for Canada West, now the Province of Ontario. He was now free to answer the call of the wilderness.

". . . I went off on the first of my long lonely excursions, botanizing in glorious freedom around the Great Lakes,"¹¹ he said.

It is often stated in the literature that John Muir was a draft dodger and much has been made of this so-called "fact." I believe this article clarifies the record.

It is evident that John's brother Dan went to Canada to avoid being drafted. It is equally evident that John did not go to Canada earlier for that same reason. To the contrary, John had studiously stayed home in Wisconsin and kept track of the draft calls. It cannot be said that he was a draft evader and it is not appropriate to label him as such.

ENDNOTES

1. Annie Muir to John Muir, November, 1862, John Muir Papers.
 2. John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), pp. 218, 219.
 3. Carolyn Mattern *Soldiers When They Go* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the Department of History, University of Wisconsin, 1981).
- Note: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has been renamed Wisconsin Historical Society.
4. Ezra Slocum Carr, untitled and undated article, Wisconsin Historical Society archives.
 5. James Davie Butler, "The Early Decade of Wisconsin University," *The Badger*, 1890, Wisconsin Historical Society archives.
 6. John Muir to Frances Pelton of Prairie du Chien, Fall, 1861, Pelton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society archives.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Anne Muir to John Muir, March 1, 1863, John Muir Papers.
 9. Ibid.
 10. William Frederic Badè, *The Life and Letters of John Muir*, Manuscript Edition, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923). Vol 9, p. 114.
 11. Ibid.

See Millie Stanley, *The Heart of John Muir's World*, Prairie Oak Press, Madison, 1995, for background information as well.



Brodiaea volubilis

John Muir: Mountaineering Writer

by Terry Gifford

(Editor's note: This article first appeared in *The Alpine Journal* earlier in 2002)

From Yosemite Valley in October 1874 John Muir wrote: 'I am hopelessly and forever a mountaineer' (1996: 207). At the age of 73 Muir wrote that he actually felt younger than he did while writing his famous first *Sierra* journal in 1869. 'This,' he wrote, 'is the reward of those who climb mountains and keep their noses outdoors' (Branch, 2001: 14). John Muir (1838-1914) always referred to himself as a 'mountaineer,' but what he meant by this is more complex than our modern use of the term. Certainly he was possessed by the compulsion to attain a summit, often leaving his companions and suffering crippling frostbite and starvation to do so, drawn on against his better judgement: 'We little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgement forbid as it may' (1992: 321). Sometimes the balance between debilitating privation and the energy needs of technical climbing must have been closer than he admitted: 'For two and a half days I had nothing in the way of food, yet suffered nothing and was finely nerved for the most delicate work of mountaineering both among crevasses and lava cliffs' (1996: 211). In his assessment of Muir the mountaineer in the *Alpine Journal* (vol. XCIX, 1994, reprinted in Gifford 1996: 898--907), Sir Edward Peck refers to Muir's vivid account of his solo first ascent of Mt Ritter, which 'belongs to the finest tradition of mountaineering literature,' but Peck makes no mention of Muir's first ascent of Cathedral Peak on 7. September 1873 ('It has more individual character than any other rock or mountain I ever saw, excepting perhaps the Yosemite South Dome [Half Dome]') (1992: 268). Muir was obsessed by Cathedral Peak when he first passed it on 14 August ('I never weary gazing at the wonderful Cathedral') and it is typical of his desire for a summit that he climbed it on the way back through Tuolumne Meadows a few weeks later. But he wrote nothing of the climb itself, which, incidentally, I believe must have

demand a handjam if he did indeed climb 'up to its topmost spire, which I reached at noon' (1992: 281).

David Mazel, in his survey of early American mountaineering writing, asserts that 'Muir was the most skilled American climber of his day.' Speaking as a modern climber Mazel goes on to say that, 'many of his routes are steep and exposed enough that those following in his footsteps have been glad of a rope, yet Muir climbed them alone' (1991: 233). In 1911 the American Alpine Club recognised Muir's contribution to American mountaineering by holding a dinner in his honour in New York. (Four days later he received an honorary Litt.D. from Yale University.) So whilst the Scottish-born John

Muir was a technically accomplished solo mountaineer practising in North America in the late nineteenth century, the term 'mountaineer' as he used it of himself, included at least three other aspects, some of which were also common to other American and European Victorian alpinists. First, he was a scientist, making observations about plant ecology, carrying instruments for recording heights and pressures, discovering living glaciers and charting their effects for the first time in Yosemite, observing talus formation from earthquake-induced rockfall, and noting the dynamics of weather changes by seeking to be at the centre of mountain storms. In his library late in his life was a collection of mountaineering books that included Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst The Alps*, Norman Collie's *Climbing on the Himalaya and Other Mountain Ranges*, Sir Martin Conway's *The Bolivian Andes* and Hudson Stuck's *The Ascent of Denali*. But most often mentioned in his letters are the works of John Tyndall who must have provided a model for Muir of



the mountaineering scientist. In September of 1871 he refers to his having been sent 'Tyndall's new book,' which must have been *Hours of Exercise in the Alps*, published in London that year. In seeking to become storm-bound on Mount Shasta (14,162ft/ 4317m) in November 1874, Muir had an agenda that defined his kind of mountaineering: 'I am the more eager to ascend to study the mechanical conditions of the fresh snow at so great an elevation; also to obtain clear views of the comparative quantities of lava inundation northward and southward; also general views of the channels of the ancient Shasta glaciers, and many other lesser problems besides - the fountains of the rivers here, and the living glaciers' (1996: 209). In fact, the essay that Muir made out of this ascent and another the following year, 'A Perilous Night on Shasta's Summit'

(1992: 891-900) is more unintentionally amusing for the fact that during the five days that Muir was causing alarm below by being holed up 'like a squirrel in a warm, fluffy nest [...] wishing only to be let alone' from which he was eventually 'rescued,' Muir wrote: 'busied myself with my notebook, watching the gestures of the trees in taking the snow, examining separate crystals under a lens, and learning the methods of their deposition as an enduring fountain for the streams' (1992: 894). Muir suspected that the interruption to his observations was really as much out of concern by the outfitter to recover his camp furniture as for Muir himself.

Muir's resilience and resourcefulness in his drifted-over bivouac ('the passionate roar produced a glad excitement') exemplifies the second additional sense in which he regarded himself as a 'mountaineer.' It is the sense in which he also refers to the birds, animals and plants of the highest regions as 'noble mountaineers.' This is the ability not just to survive, but be at home in the mountains, finding in the 'passionate roar' of the week-long snow-storm, 'a glad excitement.' Arising from this is a deeper sense in which Muir's very being is sustained by his need to be among mountains. This third additional sense in which Muir thinks of himself as a mountaineer is what gives his writing about them such uplifting vitality. Ruskin titled a chapter of *Modern Painters* 'The Moral of Landscape' and Muir knew that the moral quality of his life was being shaped by his relationship with this high Sierra landscape. He explained this as 'an infinity of mountain life,' going on to say: 'How complete is the absorption of one's life into the spirit of mountain woods. No one can love or hate an enemy here, for no one can conceive of such a creature as an enemy' (1996: 205). Of course, Hetch Hetchy Valley (a parallel Yosemite Valley within the new National Park demanded for a reservoir by San Francisco) and Muir himself were to have their enemies and Muir would learn to fight them through the joint strength of the mountaineers who formed the Sierra Club. But by then he knew in a positive sense what he was defending and that he was defending it for future generations in the concept of a National Park, which Muir is internationally famous for inventing.

The only time when Muir was to write in an alienated sense about Yosemite Valley was at a time when it seems that a human relationship in the Valley had got out of hand. Elvira Hutchings, the wife of the owner of the hotel for which Muir worked, had, it seems, intended to leave her husband for Muir as a result of the relationship that developed whilst her husband was in Washington D.C. pursuing his land claim in the Valley. At the end of the long letter in which he writes of having no enemy Muir wrote, 'I have not seen Mrs Hutchings and hope I shall not.' This sentence, which was cut from *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (Badè, 1924; reprinted in Gifford, 1996) and has only recently been published (Gisel, 2001: 250), helps to explain Muir's mood when he wrote earlier in the same letter, 'No one of the rocks seems to call me now, nor any of the distant mountains. Surely this Merced and Tuolumne chapter of my life is done' (1996: 206). This letter was written to Mrs Jeanne Carr who had been urging Muir to write fewer letters and concentrate on

books. In this letter he also resolves to turn to writing more seriously, but is daunted by the prospect: 'how hopeless seems the work of opening other eyes by mere words!' So these two causes for leaving this stage of his life in the Valley ('down, town, work') might account for Muir's disconnected mood at the end of 1875. In fact, it was not until 1894 that Muir was able to send to Jeanne Carr his first book, *The Mountains of California*: 'You will say that I should have written it long ago, but I begrudged the time of my young mountain-climbing days' (Gisel, 2001: 303).

So when Muir wrote late in his life of his 1888 ascent of Mount Rainer, that he climbed for 'the acquisition of knowledge and the exhilaration of climbing,' he had to qualify this with a statement that indicated his deepest sense of himself as a mountaineer: 'Doubly happy, however, is the man to whom lofty mountain-tops are within reach, for the lights that shine there illumine all that lies below' (1992: 970). Is it this doubleness of the mountaineering experience that is the key to the value of Muir's writing about it - this illumination derived from intense engagements with high materials that carries such meaning for us that it heightens our material lives at lower elevations? So what is it that is so distinctive about Muir's writing as a mountaineer? How do Muir's distinctive qualities compare with contemporary writing by American and British mountaineers of the Victorian era? Is the science of Muir's writing separate from its sublimity? What might we take from its Biblical language, its Miltonic cadences, its Burnsian aphorisms, to inform our own experiences and our own writing? Is Muir's four-fold concept of the mountaineer still possible, or even relevant, and is this our loss or our gain? But the first question must be: does Muir really have any standing as a mountaineering writer alongside the greatest of his American and European contemporaries who produced such magisterial books as Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) and Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe* (1871)? In briefly addressing this latter fundamental question perhaps some answers may be suggested to the others.

In 1902 Muir wrote a letter listing six books which he says 'I am now at work on.' Number three on the list reads: 'Next should come a mountaineering book - all about walking, climbing, and camping, with a lot of illustrative excursions' (1996:343). In 1984 Richard F. Fleck prepared what he believes to be that collection of mountaineering essays and it is still in print. Actually it seems likely that Muir's literary executor, William Frederic Badè, took Muir's mountaineering book outline as the starting point for compiling the posthumous collection of essays he published in 1918 under the title *Steep Trails* (reprinted in Gifford, 1992). But two of Muir's most famous mountaineering essays, which stand out for their gripping drama as 'self-rescue' stories, had already been included in earlier books. 'A Near View of The High Sierra,' Sir Edward Peck's admiration for which has already been mentioned, was a chapter in Muir's first book, *The Mountains of California*, in 1894.

This essay indicates the integration of the four-fold motives for Muir as a mountaineer. His scientific observations, for example, are also recorded as religious

experiences and the language of the divine can lead to a useful naming of plant species: 'God's glacial mills grind slowly [...] while the post-glacial agents of erosion have not yet furnished sufficient available food over the general surface for more than a few tufts of the hardiest plants, chiefly carices and erigonae' (1992: 318). The inexorable rhythm of this passage is part of its expression of the epic process whilst the scientific 'agents' can Biblically 'furnish food' for plants. Indeed, the glacial and the biological combine here to produce insights that today we would call 'ecological.' Similarly, the 'new sense' that enables him to recover from becoming cragfast - 'every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do' (1992: 322) - indicate new capacities within the self that will be carried beyond the mountains themselves. Muir knows that that 'new sense' which came to him when he was sure that he 'must fall' has its origins partly in his animal self ('instinct') and partly in 'bygone experiences.' But for Muir, this rock-climbing incident alone is not the purpose of the essay. He goes on to record more 'fine lessons and landscapes' in this three-day trip away from the landscape painters whom he had been guiding until they had found 'a typical alpine landscape.' The essay, like the experience of ecological, religious, rock-climbing, self-discovery, is framed by the demands of the aesthetic.

The second famous essay was published in the posthumous book Muir was working on in his Los Angeles hospital bed when he died, *Travels in Alaska* (1915; reprinted in Gifford, 1992). In 'The Stickeen River' Muir describes how he was persuaded to take along a companion, Samuel Hall Young, to climb Glenora Peak when 'within a minute or two of the top,' where Muir is kicking steps in loose rock around the shoulder of the highest pinnacle, his companion falls, dislocating both shoulders. Muir uses his own his braces (suspenders) and necktie (!) to strap Young's arms to his sides and gets him back to their ship, eight starlit miles and seven thousand feet of descent away. In 1879 Muir made no record of this event in his notebook 'and never intended to write a word about it; but after a miserable, sensational caricature of the story had appeared in a respectable magazine, I thought it but fair to my brave companion that it should be told just as it happened' (1992: 746). Just as this chapter of *Travels in Alaska* is more about the nature of the Stickeen River than the climbing accident, so the chapter of his re-ascent alone, 'Glenora Peak,' is what presumably Muir would have published without the incident - flora, fauna and 'one of the greatest and most impressively sublime of all the mountain views I have ever enjoyed' (1992: 764).

This was one of Muir's 'great days' in the mountains: 'When night was drawing near, I ran down the flowery slopes exhilarated.' We all know that stage of the descent after a long mountain day when 'all the world seemed new born.' But Muir's weakness for personification can lead to a final sentence such as this one: 'The plant people seemed glad, as if rejoicing with me, the little ones as well as the trees, while every peak and its traveled boulders seemed to know what I had been about and the depth of my joy, as if they could read faces' (1992: 765). This, together with

Muir's religiosity, may be too much for the modern reader, although one might wonder what uninhibited expressions of, not just joy, but the joy of inhabitation, we have lost. On the other hand, Muir can be as terse as any modern mountaineering writer; he is not beyond the single-sentence ascent: 'I therefore pushed on and reached the top' is all Muir has to say about his ascent of Half Dome up Anderson's newly installed rope after a snow-storm. Even in 1875, it seems, aid-climbing had little of literature in it. More significant to Muir were the three species of pines growing on the top and 'the curious little narrow-leaved, waxen-bulbed onion, which I had not seen elsewhere' (1992: 680). Muir's account of his ascent of Mount Rainier is laced with dry humour: 'Here we lay all the afternoon, considering the lilies and the lines of the mountains with reference to a way to the summit' (1992: 969). From what is now called 'Muir Camp,' his party left after a cold night: 'early rising was easy, and there was nothing about breakfast to cause any delay.' Sometimes the laconic Muir can counterbalance the linguistically indulgent Muir.

But perhaps the best indication of Muir's achievement as a visionary mountain scientist who sees and thinks with a unity that anticipates the concept of 'ecology,' and includes himself in that unity, is to be found not in his books, or even in the essays that predate them, but in his journals. Richard Fleck has included in his anthology of Muir's mountaineering writing some passages from the journals of the early 1870s when Muir was far from thinking of himself as a writer of a mountaineering book: 'I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travellers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention. [...] No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to know these mountains. As well seek to warm the naked and frostbitten by lectures on caloric and pictures of flame' (Fleck 1984: 103). Nevertheless, Muir *is* using words in this journal to understand the ecological unity at work within the living landscape of the Sierras: 'Nothing is more wonderful than to find smooth harmony in this lofty cragged region where at first sight all seems so rough. From any of the high standpoints a thousand peaks, pinnacles, spires are seen thrust into the sky and so sheer and bare as to be inaccessible to wild sheep, accessible only to the eagle. Any one by itself harsh, rugged, crumbling, yet in connection with others seems like a line of writing along the sky; it melts into melody, one leading into another, keeping rhythm in time' (1984: 102).

Although this harmony is expressed in what seems to be aesthetic terms (writing, painting and music are all evoked within a single sentence), what Muir has in mind is a dynamic underlying the 'rock pavements' that is revealed by empirical science: 'No wonder one feels a magic exhilaration when these pavements are touched, when the manifold currents of life that flow through the pores of the rock are considered, that keep every crystal particle in rhythmic motion dancing' (1984: 103). When Muir touches rock in the course of his enquiry as a scientist mountaineer, he receives an exhilaration that confirms his being at home within this environment. When he expresses this exhilaration in the 'word-making' of his journal, under

the heading of 'The Sierra,' he discovers that we derive our vitality from our direct contact with this mountain environment. At a time when we are finding ourselves alienated in many ways from wild, natural, mountain environments we might need to forgive Muir a little for his enthusiasm for his discovery: 'Wonderful how completely everything in wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love' (1984: 99).

This ecstatic journal note might seem to be self-serving, but Muir's intention is to counter alienation and to capture a sense of the mountain inside the mountaineer. He believed that this kind of experience would lead to a respect for that environment as a 'fountain of life' and a desire to protect the integrity of wild mountains. By contrast Clarence King, whose *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872) is regarded as a classic of American mountaineering literature, pits himself *against* the mountains, emphasising how his fortitude and courage overcome the seemingly impossible, in a style that tends towards the melodramatic. He tells a good tale, but his writing is now regarded as 'frequently exaggerated and occasionally downright false' (Mazel, 1991: 193). The centrepiece of his book is an attempt to climb Mount Whitney which is climaxed by his embracing a 'precarious ice-ladder' that has strangely fallen down, he tells us, when King comes to descend it. The ice-ladder is, says David Mazel, 'completely fictional.' 'More serious,' in his view, 'is the way King never admits that he failed in his objective.' King actually climbed Mount Tyndall and 'must have been aware fairly early' in his approach that Whitney, the higher mountain, was many miles away, yet King feigns surprise at the top of Tyndall to find that there is a yet higher peak (1991: 193). As a classic of the genre Clarence King's mountaineering book must be regarded as suspect not only in fact, but in the self-centred motivation for distorting the facts. All Muir exaggerates is his ecstasy, and that might be an accusation of the impossible.

Leslie Stephen, on the other hand, is self-consciously a model of elegant restraint and accuracy. After taking us on a climb to the Eigerjoch, Stephen describes the peaks rising above the Aletsch Glacier before suddenly catching himself out: 'So noble and varied a sweep of glacier is visible nowhere else in the Alps. Is it visible on the Eigerjoch? Did we really see Monte Leone, the Jungfrau, and the Aletschhorn with our bodily eyes, or were they revealed only to the eye of faith?' The absurdities of exaggeration and subsequent inaccuracy in mountaineering writing are his greatest fear, so he not only comes clean, but with a check on the evidence: 'I regret to say that I have undoubtedly used a certain poetic licence - a fact which I ascertained by once more reaching the Eigerjoch in 1870, though not from the same side' (1936: 57). The climbing writing which takes the reader to this pass is gripping in its detail and fluent in its style. When it comes

to catching the beauty of the view, Stephen justifies his apparent exaggeration: 'We had made a pass equal in beauty and difficulty to any first-rate pass in the Alps - I should rather say to any pass and a half. For, whereas most such passes can show but two fine views, we here enjoyed three [...] We were on the edge of three great basins' (1936: 56).

But being in such self-conscious command of the language, Stephen is uneasy about the inadequacy of the word 'beauty.' Undertaking 'moderate risk,' wearying muscles and brain by overcoming obstacles and taking in the exposure of mountain summits are necessary 'to feel their influence enter the very marrow of one's bones' (1936: 238). Stephen's great achievement is to marry that physical apprehension of mountains with that of the mind: 'Even if "beautiful" be not the most correct epithet, they have a marvellously stimulating effect upon the imagination' (1936: 238). The mountaineer has 'opened up new avenues of access between the scenery and his mind' (1936: 230). Whilst appearing to be sceptical, Stephen actually plants the suggestion that beyond being 'mere instruments of sport,' mountains for mountaineers are sources of 'more spiritual teaching.'

Which line of argument brings us back to an understanding of the achievement of John Muir's mountaineering writing. For all his guardedness against 'fine writing,' Stephen remains an aesthete in his appreciation of the mountain environment. It is Muir who pushes at the boundaries of language to unify in his writing, the physical and the imaginative, the scientific and the spiritual, the self-enlarging sport and the wider environmentalist imperatives. Perhaps it is time for us to rediscover what it meant for Muir to be 'hopelessly and forever a mountaineer.'

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Terry Gifford is Reader in Literature and Environment at the University of Leeds and Director of the annual International Festival of Mountaineering Literature at Bretton Hall Campus. He is seeking PhD research students in mountaineering literature. The article included here is part of a book project, The Legacy of John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practice.

*Photo courtesy of John Muir National Historic Site
Martinez, California*

New Books

John Muir Would Want to Read

So Great a Vision: The Conservation Writings of George Perkins Marsh, edited by Stephen C. Trombulak (University Press of New England; 256 pages; \$50 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback). Annotated edition of writings by the 19th-century naturalist, diplomat, linguist, and politician, who is often mentioned as a founder of the modern American conservation movement.

A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945, by Samuel P. Hays (University of Pittsburgh Press; 256 pages; \$45 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback). Traces the emergence of an American environmentalist culture, as well as its opposition.

Creation and Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World, edited by Calvin Redekop (Johns Hopkins University Press; 296 pages; \$45 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback). Essays on Amish and Mennonite attitudes toward the environment.

Imperfect Balance: Landscape Transformations in the Precolumbian Americas, edited by David L. Lentz (Columbia University Press; 547 pages; \$65 hardcover, \$30 paperback). Research on the impact of indigenous cultures on the ecosystems of North America, Central America, the Andes, and Amazonia before European contact.

The Way the Wind Blows: Climate, History, and Human Action, edited by Roderick J. McIntosh, Joseph A. Tainter, and Susan Keech McIntosh (Columbia University Press; 413 pages; \$65 hardcover, \$28 paperback). Research by archaeologists, anthropologists, and other scholars on how different cultures have responded to environmental problems.

An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain, by John Sheail (Palgrave at St. Martin's; 306 pages; \$72). Topics include management of environmental change by central and local governments.

Earthbodies: Rediscovering Our Planetary Senses, by Glen A. Mazis (State University of New York Press; 269 pages; \$57.50 hardcover, \$17.95 paperback). Explores various aspects of human detachment from nature.

Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History, by Ted Steinberg (Oxford University Press; 347 pages; \$30). Offers an environment-centered history of the United States since the ecological impact of European colonists; topics include how the weather affected the outcome of the Civil War.

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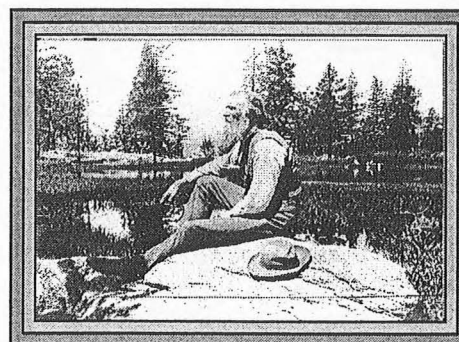
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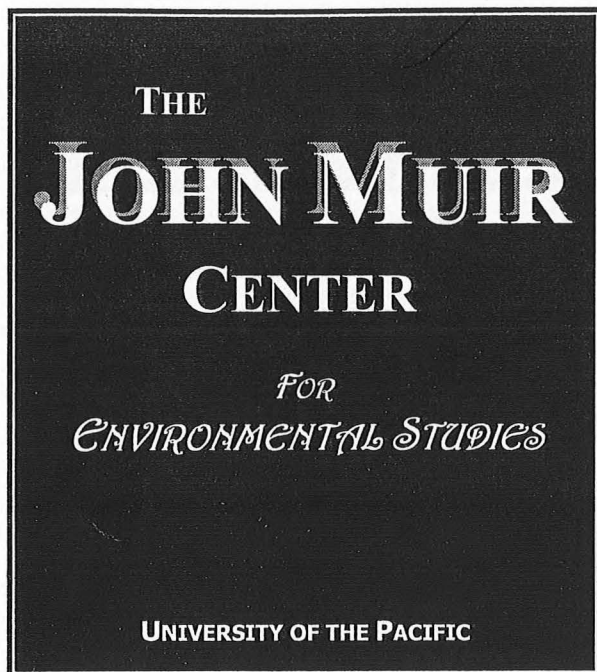
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